

---

## MILL'S HEDONISM

NICHOLAS L. STURGEON\*

INTRODUCTION .....	1705
I. METHOD IN ETHICS .....	1707
II. QUANTITY AND QUALITY .....	1710
III. PARTS OF HAPPINESS.....	1719
CONCLUSION.....	1729

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most welcome and intellectually satisfying features of the Cornell philosophy department during the almost thirty years that David Lyons and I taught there together (and since) has been its regular recruitment of careful study of the history of philosophy as a resource in addressing philosophical issues. David's work on Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill fits this pattern. David turned to these figures as a source of possibly useful ideas about moral, political, and legal philosophy, but in so doing managed to write studies of them that are models of responsible and insightful historical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> I have been especially impressed by, and influenced by, the work on Mill, the philosopher of these two whose work is better known to me. But David's attention in his essays on Mill is confined almost entirely to Mill's moral theory, along with some extension into political and legal philosophy. My aim here is to contribute something about a complementary topic of equal philosophical importance, Mill's theory of value. This is not unequivocally an exercise in rehabilitation, for I think that Mill's theory is mistaken and will say nothing to convince you otherwise. I also believe, however, that it is not beset with all the difficulties commonly alleged against it, and that seeing why can help in sorting out options in value theory. I leave that sorting for other occasions; my effort here will be to try to get straight on Mill's account of the good.

My thesis in this Paper is that Mill is a thoroughgoing hedonist about value: one who thinks not just that pleasant or enjoyable experiences are the only things that have positive intrinsic value, but that the only basic good-making quality of these experiences is their pleasantness. Furthermore, and I suppose remarkably, I think that he is *consistent* in his hedonism about value and that he does not in elaborating it fall into the inconsistencies or closely allied

---

\* Professor, Cornell University, Sage School of Philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> DAVID LYONS, *IN THE INTERESTS OF THE GOVERNED*, at vii (rev. ed. 1991); DAVID LYONS, *RIGHTS, WELFARE, AND MILL'S MORAL THEORY 3* (1994).

difficulties with which he has often been charged. Most readers will grant that Mill, in what look to be meant as definitive statements of his view, *sounds* like a hedonist, most prominently in Chapter II and again in Chapter IV of *Utilitarianism*, where he says that happiness, understood as pleasure and the absence of pain, is the only thing valuable as an end.<sup>2</sup> But then he says other things that have seemed to many readers to involve him in inconsistency: in Chapter II, that pleasures can owe their superior value to a kind of quality that outweighs quantity,<sup>3</sup> in Chapter IV that some things that are at least “in common language” distinguished from happiness, most importantly virtue, not only are but ought to be desired for their own sake, and as parts of happiness – whatever that could mean on a hedonistic conception.<sup>4</sup> Some have concluded that Mill is a hedonist, but an inconsistent one. Others, noting that Mill says a number of prominent things in his ethics and political philosophy that could be read either as an expression of his hedonism or in some other way, say an eudaimonist one, have argued for the alternative reading partly on the grounds that *if* Mill were a hedonist, then he would have to be an inconsistent one – so that that line of interpretation seems uncharitable.<sup>5</sup> My thesis cuts against both these interpretations, since it holds that Mill is consistent in his hedonism.

Often when philosophers defend a famous predecessor against charges of inconsistency, their aim is in part to rescue the views under discussion. That is not my aim with Mill. I find hedonism quite implausible as an account of value, and as will become clear I find implausible some of the key claims that he makes on behalf of his view. But I don’t think his problems include inconsistency or some of the closely allied mistakes that have been alleged against him. There is thus room for division on the question of whether my reading of Mill can be called charitable. If hedonism is implausible, as I think, then there is one kind of charity in any reading that would absolve him of holding it. But there is another sort of charity, perhaps more prized in the craft of philosophy, in saving him from allegedly obvious contradictions and other bonehead moves.<sup>6</sup> My reading argues for charity of the second sort, though

---

<sup>2</sup> See JOHN STUART MILL, *UTILITARIANISM* ch. II ¶ 2, ch. IV ¶ 2 (Liberal Arts Press 1957) (1863).

<sup>3</sup> See *id.* ch. II ¶¶ 4-7.

<sup>4</sup> See *id.* ch. IV ¶ 4.

<sup>5</sup> David O. Brink, *Mill’s Deliberative Utilitarianism*, in *MILL’S UTILITARIANISM: CRITICAL ESSAYS* 149, 149 (David Lyons ed., 1997) (arguing that Mill is not a hedonist); see also TERENCE IRWIN, III *THE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHICS: A HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY: FROM KANT TO RAWLS* 389-407 (2009) (suggesting that Mill abandons hedonism in Chapter II, and that he vacillates between hedonism and eudaimonism in Chapter IV).

<sup>6</sup> The most frequent target for the charge of boneheadedness, of course, is Chapter IV, paragraph three of *Utilitarianism*, with its alleged proof that the general happiness is a good. See MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 3. I pass by that topic here, because the standard allegation against Mill is not that that passage conflicts with his hedonism but just that it provides a bad argument for it. (In fact, for reasons I mention briefly below, see *infra* note 15 and accompanying text, I think there is nothing foolish in the view that desire could be

not mainly because it is charitable but rather because, as I shall try to show, it fits the texts.

Mill discusses these and related issues in a number of his works, spread over decades. But critics have standardly found the inconsistencies in *Utilitarianism* taken in isolation. It is possible, of course, that in so doing they are taking too narrow a view – that if they read more widely in Mill's corpus, they would see how to extricate him from apparent inconsistency. I shall not worry much about that, however, because I think an adequate reply to the critics can be found almost entirely within that well-known, much-discussed, often-taught book. So, with one exception that I shall explain, that will be my focus.

### I. METHOD IN ETHICS

Although I think that Mill is consistent in his hedonism, I do not think he is consistent about everything. I believe in particular that he is inconsistent in what he says about the proper way to reason in ethics, and that noting his inconsistency, and correcting for it, may affect our view of the passages about pleasure and its value that I mean to turn to in his Chapters II and IV. The problem is that Mill manages in Chapter I to get himself into a tight but avoidable argumentative bind. He bemoans the continuing controversy about the basic principle of morality, the highest good, while famously registering his intention to offer on behalf of the utilitarian account of that good “such proof as it is susceptible of.”<sup>7</sup> But he also seems, in this brief introductory chapter, to rule out all the forms that such proof might take. In other disciplines, he thinks, it is appropriate to reason to first principles “from below,” as we might put it, adjusting them to fit what we believe or take ourselves already to know in the field; he makes a point of saying that this is true even of mathematics.<sup>8</sup> But ethics is an exception. In such a practical discipline, he says, we need to start, and not merely finish, with a proper conception of the end: “When we engage in a pursuit, a clear and precise conception of what we are pursuing would seem to be the first thing we need, instead of the last we are to look forward to.”<sup>9</sup> So reasoning from below is out. So, however, is what Mill calls “direct proof.”<sup>10</sup> This would consist of deriving an account of the highest good from something more basic: but, as Mill understands the highest good, there is nothing more basic.<sup>11</sup> On a question of first principles, might we appeal

---

(defeasible) evidence of desirability. I also explain below why I think Mill's case for his hedonism does not rest specially on Chapter IV.)

<sup>7</sup> See MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. I ¶ 5.

<sup>8</sup> See *id.* ¶ 2.

<sup>9</sup> See *id.*

<sup>10</sup> See *id.* ¶ 5.

<sup>11</sup> There is a more specific problem given Mill's account of direct proof about value, which is that “whatever can be proved to be good, must be so by being shown to be a means to something admitted to be good without proof.” *Id.* Anyone who thinks that something

---

---

instead to intuition? This route would be open to Mill's opponents, the "intuitive school," but not to him.<sup>12</sup> Of course, Mill promises a remedy. There is a broader sense of the word "proof"; he will offer "[c]onsiderations . . . capable of determining the intellect."<sup>13</sup> But a careful reader will, I think, finish Chapter I with two clear impressions: (a) that the entire case for the basic principle of utilitarianism, the principle of utility or greatest happiness principle, will have to depend on Chapter IV, whose title indicates that it is where the proof in the broader sense is to be found; and (b) that it is hard to anticipate what sort of argument Mill can be promising – either there or anywhere else in the book – given all the avenues that he has blocked off, and equally hard to see how any argument can succeed.<sup>14</sup>

I have two comments on this predicament Mill has got himself into, one about the issues and the other about the text. My comment about the issues is that Mill should not have been so hard on reasoning from below. His stated argument against this approach is weak. One perfectly good way to test accounts of intrinsic value is to see whether, taken with our best views about causal and constitutive relations among states of affairs, they yield plausible assignments of overall value, a topic on which we often have confident views.<sup>15</sup> My comment about Mill's text is that, once he gets out of Chapter I, he clearly knows this. For the first substantive thing that he does in Chapter II, following some byplay about the use of the word "utility" and a preliminary statement of his utilitarian principle, is something that he has just said, in Chapter I, that one would never do in ethics: namely, he adjusts his account of his first principle to accommodate a mid-level generalization about value that he finds compelling.<sup>16</sup> The mid-level generalization is that the life of a swine is not a fit life for a human being;<sup>17</sup> the adjustment he makes in his first

---

could be shown to be intrinsically valuable by arguing that it conduces to something else that is good, is unclear on the concept of intrinsic value.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* Explaining the "larger meaning of the word proof" to which we may have recourse, Mill says that "[t]he subject is within the cognizance of the rational faculty; and neither does that faculty deal with it solely in the way of intuition." *Id.* "Solely in the way of intuition" might seem to leave an opening for intuition to help out, but Mill never suggests this.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *See id.* ch. IV.

<sup>15</sup> If we are discussing a moral theory as well as a theory of value, then we can also confront this entire package with more specific judgments of right and wrong in which we have some confidence. I believe that Mill does this, too, in much of Chapters II, III and V.

<sup>16</sup> *See* MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 4.

<sup>17</sup> Strictly, Mill says that even a purely quantitative hedonist can secure this result. *See id.* Many readers have doubted that he actually believes this to be so. But, in any case, Mill clearly thinks that he needs to accommodate a stronger thesis, that the life of swine is not fit for a human being, *and* that this is so for reasons other than the "circumstantial advantages" of the distinctively human pleasures. *See id.* For this he needs, on his own view, to abandon a purely quantitative hedonism.

---

---

principle, the principle of utility, is to say that the intrinsic value of a pleasure depends on its quality as well as its quantity, so much so that quality may swamp quantity.<sup>18</sup> In Chapter I, Mill says that one might appropriately fit first principles to other convictions in this way in other disciplines, but never in ethics; as soon as he is out of Chapter I, he does it in ethics.<sup>19</sup> In fact, I think that most of Chapters II-V of *Utilitarianism* is profitably viewed as defending utilitarianism by arguing that it can accommodate, or can be reformulated to accommodate, familiar views about value, and about morality, that people find or can be brought to find compelling. It is clear, moreover, that by the argumentative standards to which Mill adheres in practice, in contrast to those he articulates in Chapter I, there is no reason to require Chapter IV to come up with some new and hitherto unnoticed form of argument for the principle of utility: for the argument for requiring that depended on ruling out reasoning from below, and in practice Mill does not rule out reasoning from below.

My conclusion from this brief excursion into Mill's procedure in ethics is that although one of the passages about the value of pleasure that I want to discuss comes in Chapter II and the other in Chapter IV, we should see them as contributing in essentially the same way to Mill's argument; it does not matter than one comes from a chapter explaining "what utilitarianism is," the other from a chapter advertised by its title as providing such proof as is possible of the utilitarian doctrine. Both passages confront important objections to Mill's

---

<sup>18</sup> *See id.*

<sup>19</sup> *See id.* ch. I ¶ 2. I have said that Mill is inconsistent on this issue. There are two ways this claim could be construed. In a broad sense, it seems inconsistent to say that one ought never to do something (such as argue in a certain pattern), and then do it. Mill is in this way inconsistent. But it is also reasonable to think that, by arguing in this way in Chapter II, he implicitly affirms that it is appropriate so to argue; and this means that he affirms mutually inconsistent propositions.

I have also said that Mill alters the principle of utility in response to the criticism he considers in Chapter II, paragraph three. This is what all his contemporaries and most subsequent commentators have taken him to be doing. Still, someone might suggest that it is not what Mill presents himself as doing. He has said clearly that "[t]o give a clear view of the . . . [Greatest Happiness Principle], much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question." *Id.* ¶ 2. So it might be claimed that although Mill is filling in details in a new way, and so altering the principle to that extent, he does not see himself as *contradicting* a principle that – in earlier versions – simply said nothing about quality. However, this cannot be right. Mill begins with Bentham's version of the principle in Chapter II paragraph three, and Bentham had explicitly held that *only* quantity – intensity and duration – mattered to the intrinsic value of a pleasure. JEREMY BENTHAM, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS AND LEGISLATION ch. IV ¶¶ I-IV (Clarendon Press 1907) (1780). Bentham lists other features that matter to the value of a pleasure – e.g., propinquity or remoteness, fecundity – but these are pretty clearly not the ground of the intrinsic value of the pleasure. *See* ROGER CRISP, MILL ON UTILITARIANISM 22 n.1 (1997). Mill has to see himself as correcting a mistake in replacing Bentham's version of the principle with his own.

account of value; his response in both cases is to reformulate the doctrine in an attempt to accommodate some version of the objection; and in both cases, critics have thought that the reformulations lead him into inconsistency. In Chapter IV, it is true, he is more vulnerable to the objection – that we desire such ends as virtue disinterestedly, and that this marks them as good in themselves – because he has just insisted that desire is evidence of desirability.<sup>20</sup> But he would surely face this objection from his intuitionist opponents even if he had made no such commitment, for the idea that the object of any “natural affection,” as Joseph Butler calls it, is one that has a claim to be pursued for its own sake, is one that many could find plausible.<sup>21</sup>

## II. QUANTITY AND QUALITY

With this much preamble, let me now turn to the problem passages. The list of writers who have accused Mill of falling into inconsistency through distinguishing quality from quantity of pleasure is very long.<sup>22</sup> But there are at least two ways in which Mill might appear inconsistent on this topic – different enough that a common fix for one of them might not resolve the other – and writers are not always clear whether they are alleging only one or both.<sup>23</sup> So there is reason to go into some of the details, familiar as they may be. Mill introduces his thesis that pleasures can be ranked by quality as well as by quantity to shore up an Epicurean account of the superiority of what he calls the higher pleasures – those “of the intellect, of the feelings and the imagination, and of the moral sentiments.”<sup>24</sup> The Epicureans, evaluating pleasures only by their quantity, were forced, Mill says, to appeal to the extrinsic value, the “circumstantial advantages,” of these higher pleasures, to maintain their superiority.<sup>25</sup> But, he says, they might better have appealed to

---

<sup>20</sup> See MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 3.

<sup>21</sup> From the distinction above made between self-love, and the several particular principles or affections in our nature, we may see how good ground there was for that assertion, maintained by the several ancient schools of philosophy against the Epicureans, namely, that virtue is to be pursued as an end, eligible in and for itself. For, if there be any principles or affections in the mind of man distinct from self-love, that the things those principles tend towards, or that the objects of those affections are, each of them, in themselves eligible, to be pursued upon its own account, and to be rested in as an end, is implied in the very idea of such principle or affection.

JOSEPH BUTLER, *Preface* to FIFTEEN SERMONS PREACHED AT THE ROLLS CHAPEL AND A DISSERTATION OF THE NATURE OF VIRTUE 15, ¶ 42 (T.A. Roberts ed., 1970) (1726). In the next sentence Butler restricts this claim to “natural” affections. *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> Brink, *supra* note 5, at 178 n.1. Brink supplements the list of Mill’s contemporaries in J.B. SCHNEEWIND, *SIDGWICK’S ETHICS AND VICTORIAN MORAL PHILOSOPHY* 186 n.43 (1977). CRISP, *supra* note 19, at 32 n.8, adds more names. It would be easy to extend the list. For a few dissenters, see *infra* note 54.

<sup>23</sup> See Brink, *supra* note 5, at 149.

<sup>24</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 4.

<sup>25</sup> See *id.*

something intrinsic to these pleasures, their quality, that by itself marks them as “more desirable and more valuable” than others.<sup>26</sup> How much more desirable and valuable? Mill is famously extravagant in his answer. Invoking his competent judges as the best measure of comparative value, he writes that if one of two pleasures

is, by those competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.<sup>27</sup>

This is so far just a hypothetical evaluation, but Mill quickly adds that the preference of competent judges for the higher pleasures is in fact like this. “They would not resign what they possess more than [the fool, the dunce or the rascal], for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him.”<sup>28</sup> So virtually everyone who reads Mill, including me, thinks that (a) he distinguishes the quality of a pleasure from its “quantity” or amount and that (b) he holds that, of two pleasures, one of lower quantity may be (and often is, and by a very large margin) the more valuable because of its higher quality.<sup>29</sup>

In this doctrine as so far stated, there is no inconsistency. But there appear to be problems when we conjoin it with either of two other things that Mill says:

1. First, there is Mill’s hedonism, his central doctrine that “pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends.”<sup>30</sup> Ignoring for simplicity freedom from pain (as Mill often does himself), the commonly noted problem is this: If pleasures can owe their intrinsic value partly to their quality, which can vary independently of their “quantity” – independently, that

---

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* ¶ 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* ¶ 6.

<sup>29</sup> Some readers will think “very large margin” an understatement, for they think that Mill ascribes a lexical priority in value to the higher pleasures. *E.g.*, CRISP, *supra* note 19, at 24-32; Brink, *supra* note 5, at 153. I am not convinced. There would be a strong case for this reading if Mill said that the competent judges would prefer any amount of the higher pleasure, no matter how small, to any amount of the lower, no matter how large. But he falls significantly short of saying this. For one thing, the trade-offs that he says competent judges would refuse to make are not of small degrees of higher pleasure, but are much more momentous – an instructed person becoming an ignoramus, for example. *See* MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 6. For another, the amount of a lower pleasure of which our nature is capable may well be finite; and if so, there may for all Mill says here be an amount of lower pleasure – though one inaccessible to beings of our nature – that would compensate for some loss of a higher one.

<sup>30</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 2.

is, of how pleasant they are – then something about them other than their pleasantness must be valuable. As Henry Sidgwick says, if in pursuing the good “what we are seeking is pleasure as such, and pleasure alone, we must evidently always prefer the more pleasant pleasure to the less pleasant: no other choice seems reasonable, unless we are aiming at something besides pleasure.”<sup>31</sup> But Mill appears to be saying that we should often pursue the pleasure of lesser quantity, the less pleasant pleasure. So he must regard something other than pleasure as desirable as an end.

2. Second, and noted much less often, there is Mill’s assertion that anyone who supposes the choice of the higher over the lower pleasures to take place “at a sacrifice of happiness” is involved in a confusion.<sup>32</sup> What he carefully allows is only that the higher pleasures may come at a cost of what he calls, interchangeably, satisfaction or “content.”<sup>33</sup> But he insists that this is not the same as a cost in happiness. The two ideas, he says, are “very different.”<sup>34</sup> Mill is consistently careful about this distinction. Notice, for example, that in the passage I quoted above about the preferences of the competent judges, he says that they will choose the higher pleasures even knowing them to bring more discontent; he pointedly does not say that they would choose them even at the cost of happiness.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising, then, that in Chapter II, paragraph six, the choice that the instructed person (for example) declines, of being turned into an ignoramus, is said to involve forgoing, not greater happiness, but only greater satisfaction; and that, in the famous comparison at the end of that paragraph, it is the human being dissatisfied, and Socrates dissatisfied, who have the better life than the pig and the fool, respectively.<sup>36</sup> Mill does not say, and he clearly does not believe, that the human being, or Socrates, is less happy than the pig or the fool.<sup>37</sup> But this is puzzling. The

---

<sup>31</sup> HENRY SIDGWICK, *THE METHODS OF ETHICS* 94 (7th ed. 1962).

<sup>32</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 6.

<sup>33</sup> *But see id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* It does not matter to my argument exactly what the distinction is between happiness and “content”; I appeal simply to the fact that Mill insists that there is one. But, noticing Mill’s ascription to the “superior being” of a vastly greater capacity for happiness, one might – as perhaps only a crude first approximation – take content or satisfaction to consist in a ratio of happiness to capacity for happiness. *See id.* The superior being’s capacity is very great, that of the fool quite limited; the superior being might then have a lower measure of satisfaction (perhaps ten percent), the fool a much higher one (say ninety percent), even though the absolute level of happiness for the superior being is greater, even much greater.

<sup>35</sup> *See id.* ¶ 5.

<sup>36</sup> *See id.* ¶ 6.

<sup>37</sup> Readers sometimes miss this point, despite Mill’s emphasis. Norman O. Dahl, for example, thinks that, for Mill, Socrates’s life is less pleasant than the fool’s. Norman O. Dahl, *Is Mill’s Hedonism Inconsistent?*, 7 AM. PHIL. Q. 37, 39 (1973). J.J.C. Smart thinks that Mill attributes to Socrates more happiness than the fool, but with less pleasure – and so must be assuming that Mill here without notice abandons his hedonistic account of



higher pleasures are clearly regarded by Mill as being so much more valuable than the lower, just on grounds of quality, that they can easily justify the choice of a lesser quantity of pleasure – and so, one would think, of less pleasure – for the sake of higher quality. Having argued with such emphasis that this is possible, why is Mill then so careful not to say that this is what happens? Why does he say that it does *not* happen?<sup>38</sup>

One way to see that there are two difficulties here, not just one, is to notice that a solution sometimes suggested to the *first problem*, as I shall continue to call it, does not help with the second. The first problem involves an apparent conflict between Mill's quality-quantity distinction and his hedonism. But whether there is a conflict depends on exactly how we formulate the hedonism. A standard formulation, and pretty clearly the one accepted by most of the critics, would have a hedonist say (a) that all and only states of pleasure have positive intrinsic value, and (b) that *how* valuable these pleasures are depends solely on how pleasant they are. On this understanding, hedonism is indeed inconsistent with the view that the quality of a pleasure could make a difference to its value without making any difference in how pleasant it is. But we can imagine a weaker form of hedonism that retains the first clause while dropping the second. This would still be recognizable as a form of hedonism, since pleasures, and nothing except pleasures, would be assigned positive

---

happiness. J.J.C. Smart, *An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics*, in UTILITARIANISM: FOR AND AGAINST 1, 15 (J.J.C. Smart & Bernard Williams eds., 1973). Brink writes of "contentment or pleasure (the mental state)," as if these could be the same thing for Mill. See Brink, *supra* note 5, at 154-55. He also argues that Mill must regard Socrates's life as deficient in pleasure because he says that Socrates's life is attended with discontent or dissatisfaction. See *id.* at 180 n.12.

<sup>38</sup> A careful reader will notice that what Mill calls a mistake is thinking "that the superior being, [that is, the one pursuing higher pleasures,] in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior." MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 6. This seems to allow, against the general direction of my reading, that at least in very *unequal* circumstances, the choice of the higher pleasures could come at a cost in overall happiness. But, a preliminary point, this is clearly not enough to resolve the puzzle. For it allows that a preference for the higher pleasures could come at a cost in happiness in some extreme cases; but Mill's discussion of the gulf between the higher and lower pleasures has surely suggested that, for his competent judges, sacrifice of quantity of pleasure for quality will be routine. And, second, there seems good reason anyway to think that the exception he allows in this passage does not challenge the heart of Mill's "no-cost-in-pleasure" thesis about these choices. His reference to "circumstances" here is plausibly taken to mean, as it certainly does in his talk of the "circumstantial advantages" of the higher pleasures in Chapter II, paragraph four, that his point is about the extrinsic value of the higher (and lower) pleasures involved, due to consequences that may be beyond one's foresight or control. See *id.* ¶ 4. A choice for the higher pleasures might put someone in the way of an injury that deprived her of the capacity for enjoying the higher pleasures, for example, and in that way led to a net cost in pleasure if compared to an alternative involving some lower pleasures as well as some higher ones. Mill is in any case careful never to say that his competent judges would *knowingly* make a sacrifice of happiness, though he allows that they might accept a loss of "content."

intrinsic value. But it would allow that other factors than the quantity of a pleasure, how pleasant it is, could make a difference to *how* valuable a pleasure is. This form of hedonism would therefore not conflict with Mill's remarks on the differing quality of pleasures. This is how J.J.C. Smart reads Mill, and it has been mentioned as a possible reading by others as well.<sup>39</sup>

Though this weaker form of hedonism extracts Mill from one problem, there are still difficulties fitting it with his text. For one thing, as Sidgwick in effect points out, if Mill's hedonism comes only in this second version, then Mill has mislabeled his "Greatest Happiness Principle" – we should perhaps call it the "Best Happiness Principle" instead.<sup>40</sup> For another, even with this change in the understanding of hedonism, we still have the second problem I have described. Mill is still represented as arguing, with great emphasis and at considerable length, that a pleasure low in quantity but of high quality, may be better, in itself, than a higher-quantity pleasure. So why does he deny that the choice of higher quality ever comes at a loss of happiness? This problem remains just as puzzling as before.

Is there a solution to this difficulty? I believe so. My case for it appeals to a fact about Mill's discussion to which others have also called attention, but without (at least explicitly) drawing from it the conclusion that I intend to defend.<sup>41</sup> The key evidence is that Mill speaks interchangeably of the quantity or amount of a pleasure, and of the pleasure's *intensity* (or, in the case of pains, which here do reappear in his discussion, of acuteness). The examples come in Chapter II, paragraph eight.<sup>42</sup> Suggesting that there is no way of distinguishing pleasures even on "the question of quantity" except by appeal to his competent judges, he asks, rhetorically, "What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both?"<sup>43</sup> And then, just below, having added that comparative assessments of pleasures and pains also depend on "the feelings and judgement of the experienced": "When, therefore, those feelings and judgement declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible,

---

<sup>39</sup> Smart, *supra* note 37, at 13. Irwin mentions both readings, but suggests that the weaker one, though making Mill consistent on these issues, is not distinctively utilitarian. IRWIN, *supra* note 5, at 403. The weaker reading is the one defended by Wendy Donner. Wendy Donner, *Mill's Utilitarianism*, in THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MILL 255, 264, 266 (John Skorupski ed., 1998).

<sup>40</sup> See HENRY SIDGWICK, OUTLINES OF THE HISTORY OF ETHICS FOR ENGLISH READERS 247 (Enlarged ed. 1960). (I know of no commentator who thinks that Mill uses "greatest" in the manner of P.T. Barnum just to mean "best.")

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., CRISP, *supra* note 19, at 32; Brink, *supra* note 5, at 152; Donner, *supra* note 39, at 263, 268.

<sup>42</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

---

---

they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.”<sup>44</sup> Here “the question of intensity” is clearly, again, the same as “the question of quantity.”<sup>45</sup> And it is not surprising that Mill should equate quantity and intensity as he does in these passages. The quantitative hedonism Mill means to be modifying is Bentham’s, and Bentham had made the positive intrinsic value of any “lot” of pleasure depend solely on its intensity and duration.<sup>46</sup> Duration drops out of Mill’s discussion, presumably because he thinks that its relevance can be taken for granted, and that it can be explicitly reintroduced whenever it matters. So I shall follow him in this elision, talking for simplicity as if all that matters, for the quantity of a pleasure, is simply its intensity.

Merely noticing that Mill speaks interchangeably of quantity and intensity is not enough to solve our problem. For there is one way of understanding why Mill would do this which is of no help; and I assume that this is the way in which critics must have taken him. On this understanding, what Mill *means* by saying that one pleasure is of a greater quantity than another, is just that the first is more pleasant, more of a pleasure, than the other; and it is because he thinks that the only relation that produces this difference between pleasures is a difference in intensity, that he speaks of quantity and intensity interchangeably. On this perfectly natural reading, our problem remains. What I want to suggest, however, is a different reading that does solve our problem. My suggestion is that when Mill speaks of a difference in quantity between pleasures, *all* he means by this is a difference in intensity. To see how this might help, one has to notice a possibility that it leaves open (and that was foreclosed by the first reading I mentioned). For it implies that if there is some feature other than intensity that contributes to how pleasurable a pleasure is, then that feature – because it is distinct from intensity – does not count as quantity or amount. So we would need another name for it. And my view is that Mill thinks that this possibility is realized. According to me, Mill thinks that there are two kinds of features that can make one pleasure more pleasant, more of a pleasure than another. One of these is greater intensity, which he calls quantity. But the other is something distinct from intensity, and his name for this other feature is “quality.”<sup>47</sup> He thinks that superior quality in a

---

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *See id.*

<sup>46</sup> *See supra* note 19 and accompanying text.

<sup>47</sup> Mill emphasizes in introducing the notion that quality belongs to the nature of the pleasures that have it, so we could add that here if we wish. *See* MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 4. But it is hard to see how on his view this could be distinctive of quality. At any rate, nothing in his discussion requires that it be distinctive. The problem about intensity, when it comes to the higher pleasures, does not seem to be that they don’t have it (to some degree), or that they don’t have it intrinsically, but that they don’t have *enough* of it to establish them as everywhere superior, except by appeal to their extrinsic value because of their “circumstantial advantages.” *See id.* Quality by contrast is supposed to be something they not only have intrinsically, but have to a sufficient degree that it insures their superiority even without appeal to those other advantages.

---

---

pleasure, too, can make it more pleasant, more of a pleasure. But this does *not* mean that it is on that account greater in quantity or amount of pleasure, because quantity or amount are just intensity, and the features that Mill has in mind as making the superior pleasures more pleasant are distinct from intensity.

At this point I anticipate the objection: Doesn't anything that makes a pleasure more pleasant, or more of a pleasure, count by definition as affecting its quantity? Aren't "more pleasant" and "less pleasant" quantitative terms? To which my reply is that for many philosophers, including Mill's critics, these may indeed be quantitative terms: so that, on their understanding, a difference, call it qualitative or not as you wish, that made one pleasure more pleasant than another would by that very fact have to count as a quantitative difference as well. But, I am suggesting, Mill does not use "more pleasant" and "less pleasant" as quantitative terms in this way: though this is not really because he has a funny understanding of more and less, but because he has, if you like, an odd understanding of quantity of pleasure, as nothing more than the pleasure's intensity. But, as I have emphasized, this understanding has a perfectly understandable source.

I advertise my reading of Mill as coming with two advantages, then. One is that I have arrived at it simply by pushing a bit harder than others have done on an interesting fact that many have noticed, namely that Mill follows Bentham in equating, in some way, quantity of pleasure with intensity of pleasure. And the other is that it then solves both the problems I identified concerning Mill's discussion of quality and quantity of pleasure. To take the problems in reverse order, it should be clear that my proposal explains how Mill can without any incoherence say that there is no loss of happiness in choosing the higher pleasures over the lower, given their great superiority in quality. For although this choice is typically made at the expense of quantity – that is, of intensity – that does *not* mean that it involves a choice of a lesser pleasure over a greater, for in being superior in quality the higher pleasure is also more pleasant, so much more pleasant as to make any forgone intensity "of small account." And this reading also leaves Mill a thoroughgoing hedonist about value, and so solves the first problem. His view, on my understanding of it, is that only states of pleasure have positive intrinsic value; that there are two different pleasant-making features of pleasures, their intensity (which he calls quantity) and something else (which he calls quality);<sup>48</sup> and there is only one good-making feature of pleasures, namely their pleasantness. Both quantity and quality come in degrees, and a higher degree of either will make a pleasure

---

<sup>48</sup> Mill writes that quality divides pleasures into "kinds," in the plural. *See id.* He may just mean that there is a division into higher and lower pleasures; or he might mean that there are different ranks of value even within the superior pleasures. But he might have in mind that what he calls quality actually comprises several different factors, which combine with intensity to determine how pleasant, and therefore how valuable, a pleasure is. My reading could accommodate this complication.

more pleasant.<sup>49</sup> There is thus no inconsistency between his professed hedonism and his remarks on quantity and quality.

To these considerations I shall add one more, noting two passages that I have never seen discussed, but which I think add support to my view and make a problem for alternative readings. The first comes from a paragraph on which I have already focused attention, Chapter II, paragraph eight.<sup>50</sup> Alluding to his account of the preferences of his imagined tribunal, Mill writes, famously: "From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal."<sup>51</sup> Then he adds:

On a question [a] which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or [b] which of two modes of existence is most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both . . . must be admitted as final.<sup>52</sup>

These two questions, which I have marked with the inserted letters, are clearly meant simply to rephrase the ones about superiority in quality that he has been discussing in the preceding four paragraphs; a point further confirmed by the fact that the following sentence turns to the new and obviously contrasting claim that the same source of evidence is needed for comparing pleasures with respect to quantity.<sup>53</sup> Now, question [a], about "which is the best worth having of two pleasures," might or might not be read as asking which is the more pleasant: that is how I would read it, but a critic might disagree, taking it merely to be about the comparative value of the two pleasures. But there can hardly be a doubt that question [b], about which mode of existence is "most grateful to the feelings," is about which mode of existence is most pleasant. On my reading, this summary by Mill of what he has just been discussing is quite accurate: the question of which mode of existence produces the highest quality pleasures is the question of which one produces the pleasures with the far weightier of the two pleasant-making properties. But the standard reading, according to which questions about the quality of pleasures, because they are not about their quantity, are not about which pleasures are greatest, can only accuse Mill of carelessness here in paraphrasing his own question. Now, I have no doubt that Mill is capable of carelessness. But surely this charge should be a last resort, especially when there is an alternative interpretation

---

<sup>49</sup> This statement may require refinement if one thinks (as I do not) that Mill takes the higher pleasures to be lexically prior to the lower ones in pleasurable-ness.

<sup>50</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> *See id.* ("And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity.").

that makes clear sense of the passage in question. And I have argued that there is such an alternative.<sup>54</sup>

A similar point can be made about something that Mill says in the following paragraph. Anticipating that some might not have been persuaded by the arguments he has just offered about the superiority of the higher pleasures, he remarks that “if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it.”<sup>55</sup> I call attention to his characterization of the thesis he has just defended (and is conceding that a reader might nevertheless doubt): that “a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness.”<sup>56</sup> Again, the standard reading of Mill among his critics has to count this as carelessness in summarizing his own argument: for that reading takes him to have argued only that a noble character, enjoying noble pleasures, thereby enjoys higher quality and thus preferable pleasures, but not *greater* ones. On my reading, by contrast, Mill’s account of his thesis in the preceding paragraphs is accurate: he has argued that

---

<sup>54</sup> Although the historically predominant view of Mill’s quantity-quality distinction accuses him of falling into inconsistency, he has had a few defenders. I have already mentioned interpreters who resolve the first problem by attributing to Mill only a weaker form of hedonism; among the problems with this approach is that it does not address the second problem, as my proposal does. See *supra* note 39 and accompanying text (discussing other authors’ findings of Mill’s weaker form of hedonism). My reading also differs from other “friendly” readings of Mill of which I am aware. Ernest Sosa takes pleasures superior in quality to be on that account more pleasant – and takes this to solve the second problem as well as the first – but does so by understanding qualitative differences to be very large quantitative differences; my account keeps quantity and quality distinct. *But see* Ernest Sosa, *Mill’s Utilitarianism*, in *MILL’S UTILITARIANISM: TEXT AND CRITICISM* 154, 164 (James M. Smith & Ernest Sosa eds., 1969). Dahl also takes qualitatively superior pleasures to be more pleasant. But he maintains that Mill would be involved in no inconsistency in denying that the greatest pleasure is always the best. See Dahl, *supra* note 37, at 40. He also attributes to Mill the view that a pleasure of greater quantity is always the greater pleasure. See *id.* at 47. I disagree on both counts. Two discussions that seem closer to mine are by John Skorupski and by Crisp. See CRISP, *supra* note 19, at 30-34; JOHN SKORUPSKI, *JOHN STUART MILL* 304-05 (1989). Both see that Mill speaks interchangeably of quantity and intensity (or intensity and duration), and both hold that Mill can say that the higher pleasures are more pleasant (Crisp says that Mill need not “flinch” from saying this). See CRISP, *supra* note 19, at 33. But Crisp’s account is entangled in a way I am not certain I understand with his view (which I doubt, see *supra* note 29 and accompanying text) that Mill assigns lexical priority in value to the higher pleasures. And, in both discussions, details are missing: for example, neither brings out a point that seems to me crucial, that one pleasure can be lesser in quantity without thereby being less pleasant, or less of a pleasure, than another, and neither mentions what I have called the second problem for Mill’s view. It may for all this be that I am elaborating an argument for a conclusion that is in no serious disagreement with theirs.

<sup>55</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. II ¶ 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

in enjoying noble pleasures, one is enjoying greater pleasures, great enough because of their quality to offset any loss in quantity – which just means a loss in intensity.

So I believe that there is a reading of Mill that fits the text quite well and which defends him from standard charges about his quality-quantity distinction. The distinction is not inconsistent with his hedonism, nor does his use of it threaten his claim that a preference for the higher pleasures comes at no cost in happiness. My reading does leave Mill making what seem to me some implausible claims. While it is plausible enough that there are features beyond intensity that can contribute to the pleasurable-ness of a pleasure, it strikes me as quite doubtful that what Mill counts as the higher pleasures will always emerge as most pleasant. I am not sure that he is in a notably worse position on this question on my reading, however, than he is already, on anyone's reading, on closely related questions, such as whether competent judges defined as he defines them would actually give the verdicts he wants. (As a critic of hedonism about value, I of course think that really reliable judges would prefer intrinsically many things that are not pleasures at all.) So I do not think that my reading does him a disfavor in this respect.

### III. PARTS OF HAPPINESS

I now turn to the second well-known passage, in Chapter IV, in which Mill is thought to contradict his hedonism.<sup>57</sup> Having said in Chapter IV, paragraph three that desire is evidence of desirability, he sees that, to defend his thesis that happiness, understood as pleasure and the absence of pain, is the only intrinsic good, he must hold that this is all that people ever desire for its own sake.<sup>58</sup> But this thesis, as he immediately acknowledges, seems wrong. There are, he agrees, a number of things that people seem to desire for their own sake, and which, he agrees, “in common language, are decidedly distinguished from happiness.”<sup>59</sup> His principal example, urged by his opponents, is virtue; the rest of his somewhat random list of these things eventually includes money, power, fame, music, and health.<sup>60</sup> What Mill needs, and what he devotes considerable space to trying to formulate, is some way in which it can be true that these goods – the ones which are at least “in common language” distinct from happiness – can be desired for themselves, without this endangering his thesis that, really, only happiness is so desired. His remarks here are, I think, less clear than in any other portion of his book, and they invite conflicting readings. On one understanding, Mill appears to save both of these apparently inconsistent theses, but only at the cost of abandoning his hedonist account of happiness. It is the attraction of some version of this reading that leads some to think that he here abandons his hedonism. I shall argue that there is a better

---

<sup>57</sup> See *id.* ch. IV.

<sup>58</sup> See *id.* ¶ 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Id.* ¶ 4.

<sup>60</sup> See *id.* ¶¶ 4-6.

---

---

reading that preserves Mill's hedonism about happiness, by making pleasure and the absence of pain the only things desired strictly speaking for their own sake, while identifying a way of accepting the claim that various other things, too, are desired in that way. I doubt that there will be resistance to my claim that there is *a* way of reading Mill that preserves his commitment to hedonism. I shall try to show how my reading makes sense of the text. I shall also address the worry that, on my reading, Mill's concession to his opponents' view that we have a plurality of ends is so deflationary as to be uninteresting. I will argue that Mill's concession is not merely verbal, and that it acknowledges an interesting point.

There is another example of an end apparently sought for its own sake that surely ought to concern Mill, but which he does not mention in this chapter. This is the good of other persons. This belongs on the list of apparent counterexamples, of course, only if his thesis, that people desire only happiness, is meant to claim they ultimately desire only their *own* happiness: but Mill makes clear that that is how he means it.<sup>61</sup> So the thesis he is defending *looks* to rule out any disinterested desire for the good of others, just as it looks to rule out any disinterested desire for virtue. This would be a surprising position for a defender of any version of such an other-regarding moral theory as utilitarianism to be pushed into. In his discussion of moral demands, Mill seems to think that moral sacrifice and even deliberate martyrdom are possible, for example.<sup>62</sup> But there is no discussion in *Utilitarianism* of how this happens.<sup>63</sup> There is, however, a very interesting

---

<sup>61</sup> Mill says that the issue between him and his opponents is "whether mankind do desire nothing for itself but that which is a pleasure to them, or of which the absence is a pain." *Id.* ¶ 10. It seems clear from his discussion, in fact, that *all* of the goods admitted in Chapter IV, paragraphs five through eight, to be, in some sense, desired for their own sakes, are desired for oneself. This is obvious for money, power, and fame: the miser who desires possession of money as an end is understood to desire that he or she possess it, for example, not that others do so. This pattern is most strikingly continued in the case of virtue, for presumably Mill's associationist account of how we come to desire virtue as an end can be extended to explain why we would desire that others have it as well as ourselves. But Mill's interest appears to be entirely in explaining how we can come to desire, for its own sake, to be virtuous ourselves.

<sup>62</sup> See *id.* ch. II ¶¶ 15-18. Acting for others' sake would not require any *desire* for the good of others, thanks to an important complexity in Mill's moral psychology, if it were done solely from a settled habitual will favoring their good. For Mill's view is that motivation by habit, unlike motivation by desire, need not be aimed at one's own happiness. But he thinks that a habitual pursuit of virtue can arise only from one's initially desiring virtue, so presumably would say the corresponding thing about concern for others' good. See *id.* ch. IV ¶ 11.

<sup>63</sup> I speculate that the happiness of others is not mentioned as an end in Chapter IV of *Utilitarianism* for dialectical reasons. Mill's opponents want to establish that people care about ends other than happiness. But it would not help them achieve this goal to argue that people care intrinsically about the happiness of others (even if, on their understanding of him, Mill would deny this), because that, after all, would not be an example of people



footnote on just this question in Mill's essay, *Whewell on Moral Philosophy*, in which he distinguishes two ways of understanding the thesis that people ultimately desire only their own happiness, one on which it is consistent with their desiring the happiness of others for its own sake and one on which it is not.<sup>64</sup> I shall draw on this passage for help not only with Mill's understanding of benevolence, but also, by extension, with his understanding of a love of virtue.<sup>65</sup>

Mill says that he can hold to his thesis that people desire only happiness for its own sake, while conceding that some people desire virtue for its own sake, because, for the lover of virtue, virtue has become an ingredient of her happiness, *part* of it.

The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music, for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as for example health, are to be looked upon as a means to a collective something termed happiness, and to be desired on that account. They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end.<sup>66</sup>

He illustrates what he has in mind through a comparison with money, another good not initially desired for itself.<sup>67</sup> It may once have been desired only for what it will buy, but by a process of association it comes to be desired "in and for itself" by some people and in this way also becomes a part of their happiness. Virtue, in Mill's view, is similar. "There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain."<sup>68</sup> (Though Mill does not say, these pleasures and pains presumably include social rewards and punishments.) Then, "through the association thus formed, it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good."<sup>69</sup> And when virtue comes to be desired as an end in this way, it also counts as part of the agent's happiness, just as money does; so neither example provides a counter-instance, Mill thinks, to his view that we ultimately desire only our own happiness.

It should be clear why these remarks could lead one to think that Mill saves this thesis only by abandoning his hedonistic account of happiness, as just pleasure and the absence of pain. Happiness is suddenly "a concrete whole"

---

desiring for its own sake anything other than happiness. So Mill anticipates their focusing on a different favorite example, virtue.

<sup>64</sup> See JOHN STUART MILL, *Whewell on Moral Philosophy*, in 10 *ESSAYS ON ETHICS, RELIGION AND SOCIETY: COLLECTED WORKS OF JOHN STUART MILL* 165 (J.M. Robson ed., 1969).

<sup>65</sup> See *id.* at 184. This is the passage not from *Utilitarianism* that I warned in my Introduction that I would draw on.

<sup>66</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 5.

<sup>67</sup> See *id.* ¶ 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.* ¶ 7.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*

---

---

with parts.<sup>70</sup> And while this talk of parts may be figurative on any understanding, it would seem to be only in some special sense, in need of explanation, that virtue, money, power, fame, music, and health could be parts of pleasure and the absence of pain.<sup>71</sup> That is why Mill can seem to have shifted to a different view.

About this proposed reading I have several comments. (1) This reading takes Mill up on his suggestion that it is only in “common language” that these various ends are distinct from happiness, for his view is that in philosophical strictness they are not entirely distinct from it; they are proper parts of it. (2) The view may have a somewhat eudaimonist sound, in holding not just that happiness is distinct from pleasure but that it is a whole with parts, including virtue (even if not as a dominant part). But the view as Mill presents it does not seem very Aristotelian. For one thing, even if it is not a hedonist account of happiness, it is still a subjectivist theory: what makes something part of one’s happiness is just that one desires it for its own sake. It will thus be good (for one) because it is desired, not desired because it is good, and virtue will be part of someone’s happiness if and only if it comes to be desired in this way. Furthermore, the process by which an agent comes to desire virtue for itself is, according to Mill, the same blind process of association that turns a one-time spender into a miser about money. Mill does not present the miser’s progress towards love of money for its own sake as a rational one: at the outset money is obviously good only for what it will buy, and it is only because the miser comes to care about it that it then turns into part of his happiness, to be pursued for its own sake. Mill explains why a utilitarian will welcome people who love virtue more than those who love money, but he does not say anything to explain why coming to desire virtue is any more rational than coming to love money.<sup>72</sup> So I believe that any attempt to push Mill in the direction of eudaimonism will have to find reasons that go considerably beyond the passages I have cited.

(3) My third comment, however, is that if one looks beyond these passages to their context, what one finds are repeated indications that Mill sees his entire account as a hedonistic one after all. Consider, as a prime example, this passage:

Happiness is not an abstract idea but a concrete whole; and these [the goods Mill has listed] are some of its parts. And the utilitarian standard sanctions and approves their being so. Life would be a poor thing, very

---

<sup>70</sup> *Id.* ¶ 6.

<sup>71</sup> This point does not require G.E. Moore’s surely unfair construal, that Mill would have to mean that “these actual coins, which he admits to be desired in and for themselves, are a part either of pleasure or of the absence of pain.” GEORGE EDWARD MOORE, *PRINCIPIA ETHICA* 71 (1903). What the miser desires for its own sake is presumably a state, that of possessing money. But it still needs to be explained what would be meant by calling this state part of anyone’s pleasure.

<sup>72</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 7.

ill provided with sources of happiness, if there were not this provision of nature by which things initially indifferent, but conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures, both in permanency, in the space of human existence that they are capable of covering, and even in intensity.<sup>73</sup>

Here, the first sentence repeats the claim that can seem hard to reconcile with a hedonistic account of happiness, namely, that the listed goods are parts of happiness. But then, in the third sentence, “sources of happiness” is paraphrased as “sources of pleasure,” and the claim that various goods become parts of happiness is clearly taken to mean just that they become sources of an especially valuable sort of pleasure. If there is a conflict among these claims, Mill appears not to see it.<sup>74</sup>

Now, of course, it is possible that Mill is simply caught in inconsistency here, trying to hold to his hedonism while at the same time drawing on elements, at least, of a conflicting view with which the hedonism cannot be

---

<sup>73</sup> *Id.* ¶ 6.

<sup>74</sup> This passage is not an isolated one. A few sentences earlier, describing the process by which something comes to be desired as an end, Mill writes:

What was once desired as an instrument for the attainment of happiness has come to be desired for its own sake. In being desired for its own sake it is, however, desired as *part* of happiness. The person is made, or thinks he would be made, happy by its mere possession; and is made unhappy by failure to obtain it.

*Id.*

Of course, part of what is at issue in reading Mill is what “happy” and “unhappy” mean in the last of these sentences. One might think that he cannot be talking about pleasure and the absence of pain, as the previous sentence speaks of happiness as having parts, and it is not clear what it would mean for pleasure and the absence of pain to have parts. But in the first sentence, happiness seems clearly to be pleasure; at least, no commentator I know of has thought that when Mill speaks of money, say, as initially merely instrumental to happiness, he has in mind anything but a hedonistic account of what it is instrumental to. But that suggests that happiness in the third sentence is, after all, pleasure and the absence of pain. Or, again, consider these two sentences together:

Whatever is desired otherwise than as a means to some end beyond itself, and ultimately to happiness, is desired as itself a part of happiness, and is not desired for itself until it has become so. Those who desire virtue for its own sake desire it either because the consciousness of it is a pleasure, or because the consciousness of being without it is a pain, or for both reasons united . . . .

*Id.* ¶ 8.

Here again, Mill seems to be providing an entirely hedonistic account of what is involved in desiring virtue as part of happiness. Finally, there are passages that say nothing about happiness having parts, but which summarize this entire discussion as having argued that no “desire can possibly be directed to anything ultimately except pleasure and exemption from pain.” *Id.* ¶ 11.

reconciled.<sup>75</sup> My suggestion, however, is that there is a way of making consistent sense of what Mill says, and that it leaves him a hedonist about happiness, and hence about the good. What I say here is in outline not original: mainly, I am just agreeing with Sidgwick's assessment that the

distinction which [Mill] is really concerned to emphasise [sic] is that between the state of mind in which money is valued solely as a means of buying other things, and the state of mind – such as the miser's – in which the mere consciousness of possessing it gives pleasure, apart from any idea of spending it.<sup>76</sup>

Sidgwick's diagnosis has a dismissive tone; I will return to the question whether this reading makes Mill's view a disappointing one. But first we should note the evidence for this view. Mill speaks of an "immediate pleasure" that is "naturally inherent" in some goods, such as power and fame; I take him to mean that this same sort of immediate pleasure, the kind that arises from the "mere possession" of the desired good, is what, by association, can also come to be inherent in money and virtue, even if it was not initially or naturally so.<sup>77</sup> This he several times contrasts with the pleasure to which something is instrumentally "conducive," as a means to an end.<sup>78</sup> And much of what he says falls nicely into place if we take him to use this distinction as follows. We need to attribute to him the view that when something is said to be desired as an end, or for itself, this can be understood either quite strictly or else more loosely and in accord with "common language." When he says that

---

<sup>75</sup> Irwin sees Mill as vacillating between a eudaimonist and a hedonist view from sentence to sentence in the passage I have just quoted. See IRWIN, *supra* note 5, at 406-07 n.29. Part of his reason for seeing a strong eudaimonist strain in Chapter IV of Mill's *Utilitarianism* derives from his conviction that Mill had already abandoned hedonism in Chapter II; so the argument of my previous section is also relevant here.

<sup>76</sup> SIDGWICK, *supra* note 31, at 93 n.1. Crisp offers a similar account. See CRISP, *supra* note 19, at 86-88.

<sup>77</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 6.

<sup>78</sup> *Id.* ¶ 6-7. In his first statement of his utility principle in Chapter II, Mill has it saying that "pleasure and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things . . . are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain." *Id.* ch. II ¶ 2. His wording does not make absolutely clear whether he is distinguishing two or three categories of desirable things. (The answer would clearly be three if he had written "all *other* desirable things.") I am inclined, however, to read this as a three-way distinction: putting the absence of pain to one side, there are (1) pleasure itself, (2) things with pleasure inherent in them, and (3) things that are means to pleasure. (Irwin also appears to see a three-way distinction here. See IRWIN, *supra* note 5, at 399.) If we assume that three categories are meant, my view is that is that the distinction Mill wants in Chapter IV, paragraphs five through eight, is between desiring something for being in category (3) above, and desiring it for being in category (2), where being in category (2) – having pleasure inherent in it – is being the sort of thing whose possession is a source of immediate pleasure, rather merely being, as with category (3), an instrumental means to pleasure.

pleasure and the absence of pain are the only things desired as ends, he means this strictly: they are not desired for the sake of anything else of which they are a "source."<sup>79</sup> But when he says about anything else, such as virtue or money, that it is desired as an end, what he means by contrast is that it is desired, not for pleasure to which it is instrumentally conducive, but instead just for the pleasure inherent in it, the pleasure of which it is or has become, as he says, a source.<sup>80</sup> Desiring something as a part of one's happiness is then to be understood as desiring it in this second way, not as instrumentally conducive to pleasure but for the sake of the immediate pleasure of possessing it. (I granted above that we would need an explanation of what it could mean for something to be a part of one's happiness, on a hedonistic conception of happiness. This is Mill's explanation.) Notice that this understanding, like the non-hedonistic one I sketched above, honors Mill's suggestion that it is in common language, but only in common language, that a desire for virtue or money is distinguished from a desire for happiness: for, on this hedonistic account, happiness *is* pleasure and the absence of pain, and desiring either virtue or money as an end turns out to be desiring it for the pleasure of which it is in a distinctive way the source.

There is further support for this reading in Mill's account of concern for the good of others, in that note attached to his essay on Whewell.<sup>81</sup> Mill finds in William Whewell the thesis that we cannot desire anything other than our happiness, "except by identifying it with our happiness."<sup>82</sup> He comments that on one understanding he agrees with this thesis, but on another not.<sup>83</sup> He disagrees if it means that we cannot desire anything unless we see it as an instrumental means to our own happiness.<sup>84</sup> But he says, to Whewell's thesis

we should have nothing to object, if by identification was meant that what we desire unselfishly must first, by a mental process, become an actual part of what we seek as our happiness; that the good of others becomes our pleasure because we have learnt to find pleasure in it; this is, we think, the true philosophical account of the matter.<sup>85</sup>

Note three points. First, Mill says he is giving an account of what it is to care unselfishly about the good of others, and so, in an important sense, to care

---

<sup>79</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 6.

<sup>80</sup> These are not the only ways in which money, say, can give rise to pleasure. What about the disproportionate pleasure some take in spending money on items from which they expect little benefit? The idea, I think, would be that just as it is possible to desire money for the pleasure of having it, apart from the benefit from anything it will buy, so it is possible to value spending it – to love shopping – just for the pleasure inherent in doing so, apart from any benefit from what one is buying.

<sup>81</sup> MILL, *supra* note 64, at 184.

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> *Id.*

<sup>84</sup> *Id.*

<sup>85</sup> *Id.*

about them for their sake, not just our own. Second, the account says that we come to care in this way when, though “a mental process,” we have learned to find pleasure in their good: and clearly, since Mill is explicit that he is not talking about pleasure for us to which their happiness is instrumental, he means the sort of immediate pleasure we have also found him talking about in Chapter IV of *Utilitarianism*. And, third, he says that when we learn to find pleasure in the good of others in this way, that makes their good part of our own happiness. So, Mill thinks that he has explained a respectable and important sense in which we really can care unselfishly about the good of others.<sup>86</sup> A strictly accurate account of how this happens, however, the “true philosophical account of the matter” requires that the others’ good be something in which we have learned to take an immediate pleasure: so we are, again in strict accuracy, caring about our own pleasure all the while, though a distinctive sort of pleasure. And, when we do this, Mill will say that their good has become part of our happiness. This is just the reading I have suggested for Chapter IV, paragraphs five through eight, applied to an example that he neglects to consider there.<sup>87</sup>

As I have indicated, I doubt that many would deny that this is a reading of Mill that fits his texts well, and that preserves his view that, strictly, we desire nothing for its own sake but pleasure and the absence of pain. The question will be whether, on this understanding of him, the distinctions he draws can bear the weight that he needs to put on them. On the one hand, he needs for desiring something as a part of our happiness, in the sense in which he acknowledges this to happen, to be different enough from desiring it as a means to happiness, to convince his opponents that he has really accommodated their point that we desire a plurality of goods for themselves. On the other, he also has to construe desiring something as part of our happiness as, strictly speaking, desiring it for no more than the pleasure of which it is a source, if he is to avoid admitting that we ultimately desire things besides happiness. A common reaction of readers is to doubt that his accommodation of his opponents’ objection is more than merely verbal. Roger Crisp says that we must admit that Mill “speaks quite loosely in his talk of desiring virtue and other things for their own sake.”<sup>88</sup> T.H. Irwin says that the things Mill distinguishes as having pleasure inherent in them – virtue, money, and the like – are, “strictly speaking,” just further means to pleasure;<sup>89</sup> presumably, Irwin also thinks that desiring something for the pleasure inherent in it will, strictly speaking, just be desiring it as another means to pleasure.

---

<sup>86</sup> That Mill views this sense as respectable and important is indicated by his use of it in correcting Whewell: “In Dr. Whewell’s view of morality,” he writes, “disinterestedness has no place.” *Id.* at 184 n.\*. He clearly intends that, in his own theory, disinterested desire *does* have a place.

<sup>87</sup> MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶¶ 5-8.

<sup>88</sup> CRISP, *supra* note 19, at 86.

<sup>89</sup> IRWIN, *supra* note 5, at 399.

---

The charge is not new. I quoted Sidgwick above, giving what I think is an accurate précis of Mill's view; but Sidgwick introduces that account by remarking that Mill's talk of money, power, and fame becoming parts of someone's happiness is "a mere looseness of phraseology," while allowing in a kind of backhanded defense that this failing may be "venial in a treatise aiming at a popular style."<sup>90</sup>

Against this common accusation, I offer a limited defense of Mill. My defense is limited because I think that Mill is wrong about the relation between pleasure and desire. I follow Butler in thinking that there are a number of things other than pleasure,<sup>91</sup> including the good of others, that we desire for their own sake in the strictest sense, where this means: not even for the sake of pleasure we take in those things. I agree with Butler, indeed, that the associated pleasure typically results from the satisfaction of a desire for something other than pleasure. So I reject Mill's hedonism about motivation by desire, as well as his hedonism about value. At the same time, I think that there is more interest than critics have allowed in the distinction Mill draws between desiring something as an instrumental means to pleasure, and desiring it for the immediate pleasure that comes with its realization. This is most easily illustrated with the example of benevolence or concern for the good of others, which we have noted that Mill does not discuss in Chapter IV of *Utilitarianism*: one reason for my attending to the note in the essay on Whewell. Mill claims to give an account of how our concern for another can be genuinely unselfish. Any critic will grant that Mill has identified a kind of concern that is like genuine benevolence in not being based on an instrumental calculation of external rewards: it is not, for example, a concern to act for another's good because of an expectation of reciprocity or of burnishing one's reputation. But the critic will object that this concern is still unlike what real benevolence or unselfishness would have to be, in depending on a different reward, the pleasure one expects from seeing the good of others' promoted or realized.<sup>92</sup> Allow for the moment that this is correct, that a genuinely benevolent desire, strictly speaking, could not be based on expectation of even this immediate pleasure in the good of others. It still seems, as Mill pictures the situation, that even if the desire isn't benevolent, the *pleasure* certainly is. It is, to repeat, immediate pleasure in the good of others, not based on any calculation of benefit to oneself. (And it will have as its counterpart immediate distress at the unhappiness of others, not based on any calculation of benefit to oneself.) So I think that Mill's motivational picture allows for genuinely

---

<sup>90</sup> SIDGWICK, *supra* note 31, at 93 n.1.

<sup>91</sup> BUTLER, *Preface*, *supra* note 21, at 12-15, ¶¶ 35-41; BUTLER, *Sermon 11*, *supra* note 21, at 99-110, ¶¶ 1-11.

<sup>92</sup> Mill writes in Chapter IV of *Utilitarianism* of pleasure in the "mere possession" of virtue or money. See MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV. But we need a different term for what immediately pleases, in a quite similar way, about another's good. (And "possession" will hardly do, anyway, for music, one of the examples in Chapter IV.)

unselfish, benevolent pleasures.<sup>93</sup> And on this basis I would make two suggestions. The first is that if I thought Butler was wrong, and thought that all desires had to be aimed, ultimately, at one's own pleasure, I would still think that Mill had identified something special about motivation to achieve *this kind* of pleasure; and I would not think it a verbal cheat for him to say that a desire for this sort of pleasure was, in an important way, an unselfish and benevolent concern for the good of others, and that it made their good part of one's own.<sup>94</sup> And the second is that, even taking it that Butler is right, and that there are desires for the good of others that are in no way aimed at one's own pleasure, there are surely also, mixed with them, desires of the sort Mill describes, aimed at the immediate pleasure one takes in seeing the good of others realized; and I do not find it very misleading to call those desires, too, unselfish and benevolent, like the pleasures to which they are directed, and like the desires with which they are clustered.

Transferring these points to the examples in Chapter IV, paragraphs five through eight, is not mechanical, but I believe that a version of them can be made plausible for the central example of virtue. I here make the fairly safe assumption about Mill's moral theory, that he will distinguish a love for virtue from a concern for the good of others, however interestingly the two may be related. So the immediate pleasure that accompanies virtue, in the person whom Mill wants to say desires virtue for itself, is not a benevolent pleasure. I think that a case can be made, however, for applying to it the label Mill wants to apply to the desire for it, namely "disinterested."<sup>95</sup> Though the disposition

---

<sup>93</sup> Bentham, too, allows that there are "[p]leasures of benevolence or goodwill," appearing to have a similar phenomenon in mind. See BENTHAM, *supra* note 19, at 36. A complete account would need to discuss what it is to take pleasure *in* some state of affairs. Here I leave this at an intuitive level, taking it as obvious that the immediate pleasures that Mill speaks of as arising through association are pleasures in virtue, in the good of others, in possessing money, and so on.

<sup>94</sup> I am influenced here by a point common to many philosophical discussions of linguistic reference, that when we discover that the world contains nothing that quite fits some definition we had thought attached to one of our terms, we do not always conclude that our term refers to nothing; sometimes we decide that we need a better definition, shaped in part by what the world has to offer. I think that Mill has made a plausible case that if we lived in what we might call a Mill-world rather than a Butler-world – that is, in a world in which all desires had at bottom to be for one's own pleasure – we should not conclude that our term, "disinterested benevolence," refers to nothing; that we should decide instead, on balance, that he has provided a reasonable account of that very phenomenon.

<sup>95</sup> See MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 5. I think that this case can be made even taking account of the point from above, that Mill discusses the desire for virtue that he thinks some acquire as if it were solely a desire for virtue in *oneself*. See *supra* note 61 and accompanying text. This would mean that the immediate pleasure that someone with this desire takes in virtue would be limited to pleasure in his or her own virtue. But, first, Mill may not really be limited to this rather narcissistic picture of the lover of virtue. He may well think (and plausibly) that a lover of virtue will take pleasure in it no matter who displays it; the focus on a desire for virtue in oneself may be an artifact brought about by his



---

---

to this sort of immediate pleasure in virtue (and distress at its absence<sup>96</sup>) will have arisen through association from a history of reward and punishment, we are to understand that it no longer depends on this regime or on any other calculation of one's benefit. And, if we are willing to call the pleasure (and distress) disinterested, then I think there is an argument similar to the one I just gave about benevolence for saying that the desire for the pleasure (and for avoiding the distress) is also, in a derivative but significant way, disinterested itself. This is most plausibly so if one thinks, as Mill does, that there are for contrast no desires around that are not somehow ultimately for one's own pleasure (or exemption from pain); it retains I think some force even if one thinks, as I do, that there are also desires that are disinterested in an even stricter sense.

#### CONCLUSION

As I have said several times, I think that Mill is wrong about the big issues in the passages I have discussed. I do not believe that pleasure and the absence of pain are the only things valuable as ends, nor do I think that pleasure and the absence of pain are the only things that are, strictly speaking, desired for their own sakes. And I also agree with critics that Mill expresses himself unclearly. (Indeed, if I assume that the interpretation I have defended is correct, I pretty well have to think that he is unclear: no one who wrote clearly would require anyone to do nearly as much work as I have had to do here to defend him from the charge of having fallen into hopeless confusion.) But I do believe, for the reasons I have given, that on these issues Mill is consistent; and I do not think in either of the cases I have examined that his consistency comes at the expense of mere verbal subterfuge. He is a better philosopher than that.

---

opponent's focus on that sort of example. And, second, even immediate pleasure just in one's own virtue (and immediate distress at its absence), even if it is focused on oneself, is not in the mature person based on, or derived from, any perception of the *advantage* of being virtuous. So the term "disinterested" would still seem to apply.

<sup>96</sup> See MILL, *supra* note 2, ch. IV ¶ 8.